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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 008454

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SUBJECT: BACKLASH AGAINST CAPTURE OF SADDAM HUSSEIN

REF: AMMAN 08196

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for Reasons 1.5 (b),(d)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) Although many Jordanians received the news of Saddam Hussein's capture with satisfaction or ambivalence (see ref), there has been some recent backlash against his arrest and perceived treatment by U.S. forces. A majority of members of Parliament denounced the "mean and humiliating" manner of Saddam's capture and the broadcast of "humiliating footage of a former Arab president," but made clear that their views did not reflect support or opposition to the policies of Saddam himself. A demonstration in the city of Irbid called for Saddam's release, and Jordan's Bar Association formed a legal "defense panel" for Iraq's "legitimate president." These moves are more indicative of opposition to U.S. policy and the occupation of Iraq than genuine support for the former Iraqi dictator. End Summary.

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MPs DECRY SADDAM'S "HUMILIATION"  
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2. (U) Sixty-five of the 110 members of the Lower House of Parliament lent their names to a statement released to the press December 20 that condemned the manner of Saddam Hussein's arrest, describing it as "mean and humiliating." The statement denounced the airing of television footage and photographs of Saddam following his capture as "a humiliation to the states and the people of the region." The legislators further condemned the occupation of Iraq as part of a "wider Zionist plan," called for the U.S. to withdraw its forces from the Middle East, and urged the GOJ to press the U.S. to transfer control of Iraq to the Iraqi people as soon as possible.

3. (U) The MPs' statement did not, however, express direct support for Saddam or call for his release from custody. Rather, it said that the MPs objected to Saddam's treatment by his captors "regardless of whether we agree with him or oppose him."

4. (U) According to the Arabic press, the statement was primarily the handiwork of MPs Mahmoud Kharabsheh (East Banker, Balqa) and Khalil Ateyeh (West Banker, Amman - 1st District). During the debate in Parliament prior to a vote of confidence in the government of Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez, the head of the Democratic Alliance bloc, Mamdouh Abbadi (East Banker, Amman - 3rd District) drew a round of applause when he saluted the Iraqi resistance and Saddam Hussein. He called Saddam "a true hero who fought until the last minute."

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TAKING IT TO THE STREET  
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5. (C) A demonstration was held December 21 in the northern city of Irbid which, according to organizers, was to "show solidarity" with Saddam and to demand his freedom. The Arabic press reported that there were "hundreds" of participants in the peaceful demonstration who waved pictures of Saddam and condemned U.S. occupation of Iraq, as well as the "shameful silence" of Arab governments. Post has been unable to confirm the true size of the protest and it is likely that a number of demonstrators were "placed" there to keep an eye on the situation.

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"OBJECTION, YOUR HONOR!"  
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6. (U) The Jordanian Bar Association placed an advertisement December 20 in the press announcing the formation of a "defense panel" for Saddam, "the legitimate president of Iraq who was subjected, along with Iraq and the people of Iraq, to an armed robbery by the occupation troops." Over 300 attorneys have allegedly volunteered for the panel.

7. (U) The decision to create a defense panel was

spearheaded by the outspoken head of the Bar Association, Hussein Mujali. When asked about the celebrations in Iraq following Saddam's capture, Mujali had told reporters, "In any country there are opportunists...I will not be surprised if all we have seen on TV showing the jubilation of the Iraqi population is a cheap Hollywood-style act played out and directed by American intelligence."

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) The mild backlash against Saddam's capture has more to do with local politicians' self-aggrandizement than any real depth of public support for the former dictator, or genuine desire to see Saddam return to power. His arrest, however, provides an opportunity for local politicians and opposition leaders to tap into the very real unpopularity of U.S. regional policies, which continue to be perceived as inattentive to Arab interests.

19. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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